

## Field Notes and Observations

December 28, 2006

Ford Mauney



It's 6:00 am. I stumble into the kitchen to grab a bowl of cereal and milk. The eastern horizon glows a dull pink. The kitchen table sits in a bay window that faces southwest. I built a feeding platform on the trunk of an oak that is some three feet in diameter and some four feet away from the glass. The grey squirrels greet me every morning and the flying squirrels tuck me in at night while they enjoy their meals of black oil sunflower seeds. I pour the milk, dig through the dish rack for a table spoon, and take my seat. We dine together often, the squirrels and I.

As I step out the back door, the morning air is clear with the exception of the ever present white whiffs of breath that quickly disappear in the cool dry air. I load a couple of freshly cleaned kennels on the back of my truck. The engine should be warm by now; it has been running a good twenty minutes. The kennels will come in handy on the trap line this morning. The wolves are more active when it's cold. It seems most wildlife is more active when it's cold.

It's the time of year when we trap in order to determine who is paired with single wolves or should I say radio collared wolves that have no other radio collared wolf of the opposite sex with them. Most of the time we catch a wolf that has never been radio collared, but sometimes it's an individual who's collar has gone dead. Either way, it's usually a wolf that I've seen before. Sometimes I find tiny pups with their eyes still closed and only a few months old. When a pup is caught, we implant a transmitter. Still others are captured and fitted with their first radio collar. Though we don't give them names, we remember the individuals by their actions as I suspect they remember us by ours.

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It is 8:30 am. I have been on the road for an hour. The sky is cloudless and cool, not cold. We have been fortunate as this winter has been like an extended fall. Nothing too drastic, a little rain, a few nights near freezing but not many, just enough to make the woodstove in the kitchen feel real good. As I turn on the farm road, NPR's (National Public Radio) Morning Edition is half way through its last repetition for the day.

Before the truck stops at my first trap set, I see the tell-tale signs of a capture. I find a female wolf in my trap. I gently remove her and place her in the kennel. After scanning her for an RFID chip, (Radio Frequency Identification), I discover that the last time I saw her she literally fit in the palm of my hands. She was from a litter of four: two brothers and two sisters. She is now six months old and traveling out beyond the boarder of what I consider to be her natal home range. Some pups disperse early, or she may just be making exploratory movements, Testing the waters, so to speak.

I load her on the truck and continue on the farm road. I notice a Bald eagle sitting on the limb of a tall barren snag jutting out of the thin row of trees along the canal bank. The eagles seem to follow the migrating geese and swans. We usually see them near catfish farms until the waterfowl arrives and then they frequent the wheat fields where the geese and swans come to graze. Up ahead I see another wolf waiting for me. Again it doesn't have a radio collar.

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It's approaching 12:30 p.m. as I pull in at Chris's house. I have three wolves in the back of the truck to process. We unload the kennels and arrange them in the processing shed to facilitate the handling of the animals. There are two females and a male-all are siblings but one is from a different litter.

The last animal I caught today was from a litter in 2004. (A transponder inserted while she was a pup confirmed the date.) We weren't sure she had survived, since we were unable to capture her the previous year when trapping within her natal home range. Maybe she had dispersed early. Whatever the case, we know she is alive and well now. Her younger siblings from the 2005 litter must be following the same travel routes she did during dispersal. I wonder if they know they have the same parents? They have senses that are much keener than ours. Surely they detect something familiar in each other?

Processing involves taking blood samples, body measurements, fitting radio collars, and giving vaccines. It takes two people about 45 minutes to completely process one wolf, that is, one that has never been captured before. If it's a recapture or capture to replace a collar, the full processing is not necessary. We only give vaccines and fit the animal with new collars if they have been processed two or more times before.

Ryan and Art pull into Chris's drive from checking their lines. We are just finishing up preparing the shed for processing as they pull up. They each have a wolf on their trucks also. We talk about who has seen what type of sign on their individual lines and discuss where we might begin to trap next. When we are all talked out, we sit down on the tailgates of our trucks or against trees for a little lunch before we begin processing the wolves. By night fall, all five red wolves will be back in the wild with new collars and none the worse for wear.